Short shift for Sinner, Keys through as Osaka steals show

MELBOURNE: Jannik Sinner and Madison Keys made winning starts to their Australian Open title defences on Tuesday but former champion Naomi Osaka made the biggest splash on day three of the tournament with a dazzling entrance before her match.

Popular Frenchman Gael Monfils meanwhile bid farewell to Melbourne Park with an epic defeat and thanks for "an amazing ride".

Sinner, who is aiming for a third straight title at Melbourne Park, spent only 68 minutes on Rod Laver Arena in his first outing of the 2026 season before Hugo Gaston retired because of injury while losing 6-2, 6-1.

The world number two consoled the weeping Frenchman and wished him well in his recovery before declaring himself delighted with the results of his off-season training.

"I was very happy," said the Italian. "We put in a lot of work to be back on court and it felt great. Obviously not the way you want to win the match, but from my side I'm very happy to be back on court. I knew from the beginning that I had to play a very high level and was trying to be as aggressive as possible, which I've done."

Sinner showed some signs of rust at the start and was forced to save three break points in his opening service game before finding his imperious touch.

Should he win three titles in a row in Melbourne, Sinner would join Novak Djokovic as the only men in the Open era to do so.

Melbourne Park's favourite Frenchman of recent years, Monfils, was bundled out in the first round in a brave goodbye to a tournament he has lit up so many times down the years.

The 39-year-old, one of the most colourful and popular players in men's tennis, battled all the way but Australian qualifier Dane Sweeny prevailed 6-7 (3/7), 7-5, 6-4, 7-5 in an epic lasting nearly four hours.

There was an on-court presentation and standing ovation afterwards for Monfils, who said: "My journey started in 2003 with you guys, now we are in 2026 and somehow it's the finish line, but thank you so much for an amazing ride."

Monfils, who has won 13 ATP titles in a career stretching back to 2004, said in October that this year would be his last in tennis.

American Keys admitted being "very nervous" as she launched her maiden Grand Slam title defence with a shaky 7-6 (8/6), 6-1 victory over Ukrainian Oleksandra Oliynykova.

Keys stunned Aryna Sabalenka 12 months ago in a three-set classic to win her first major crown at the age of 29, but she failed to push on, winning no more titles in 2025.

A double break down thanks to some untimely double faults, Keys trailed 4-0 before forcing a tiebreak in which the unorthodox Oliynykova caused chaos with her deep, looping shots.

Oliynykova brought up two set points but Keys erased the deficit with some trademark big-hitting to eventually snatch a tense tiebreak before racing through the second stanza.

"I think at the start I just felt like I was playing just a little timid and not really trusting my first instinct," said the ninth seed. "I felt like I kind of kept changing my mind on what I actually wanted to do. I felt like I was reacting instead of having a plan of what I wanted to do."

Oliynykova, who was playing in her first major, wore temporary face tattoos — blue flowers that matched her outfit and the court — but she was put into the shade in the fashion stakes by Osaka.

JELLYFISH-INSPIRED

In one of the boldest fashion statements ever seen on a tennis court, Osaka entered Rod Laver Arena carrying a white parasol with a voluminous trailing veil and wore a wide-brimmed hat above a long turquoise tunic with crimped white trousers.

The 28-year-old from Japan is well known for her on- and off-court fashion statements. She waved regally to the crowd and the four-time Grand Slam champion then folded up the umbrella and neatly put the hat and veil to the side.

The 2019 and 2021 Melbourne Park champion's tennis was at times less impressive than her self-designed outfit but Osaka finished strongly to beat Croatian Antonia Ruzic 6-3, 3-6, 6-4 and take her place in the second round.

"It's modelled after a jellyfish," she said of her get-up. "I'm just so grateful that I get to be able to do the things that I love. It's really beautiful."

Leylah Fernandez, the 2021 U.S. Open runner-up, was not so fortunate and exited with a 6-2, 7-6 (7/1) loss to Janice Tjen, who became the first Indonesian to win a match at the Australian Open in 28 years.

Tjen, who this time last year was ranked 413 but is now the world number 59, is the first Indonesian to win a match at the major since Yayuk Basuki in 1998.

There were comfortable first-round wins for fifth seed Elena Rybakina, in-form Tokyo Olympics gold medallist Belinda Bencic and 2017 French Open champion Jelena Ostapenko.

Sloane Stephens, the 2017 US Open champion who had to qualify the season-opening major, lost to Karolina Pliskova 7-6 (9/7), 6-2, while Tereza Valentova beat Australia's Maya Joint in straight sets.

TSITSIPAS RALLIES

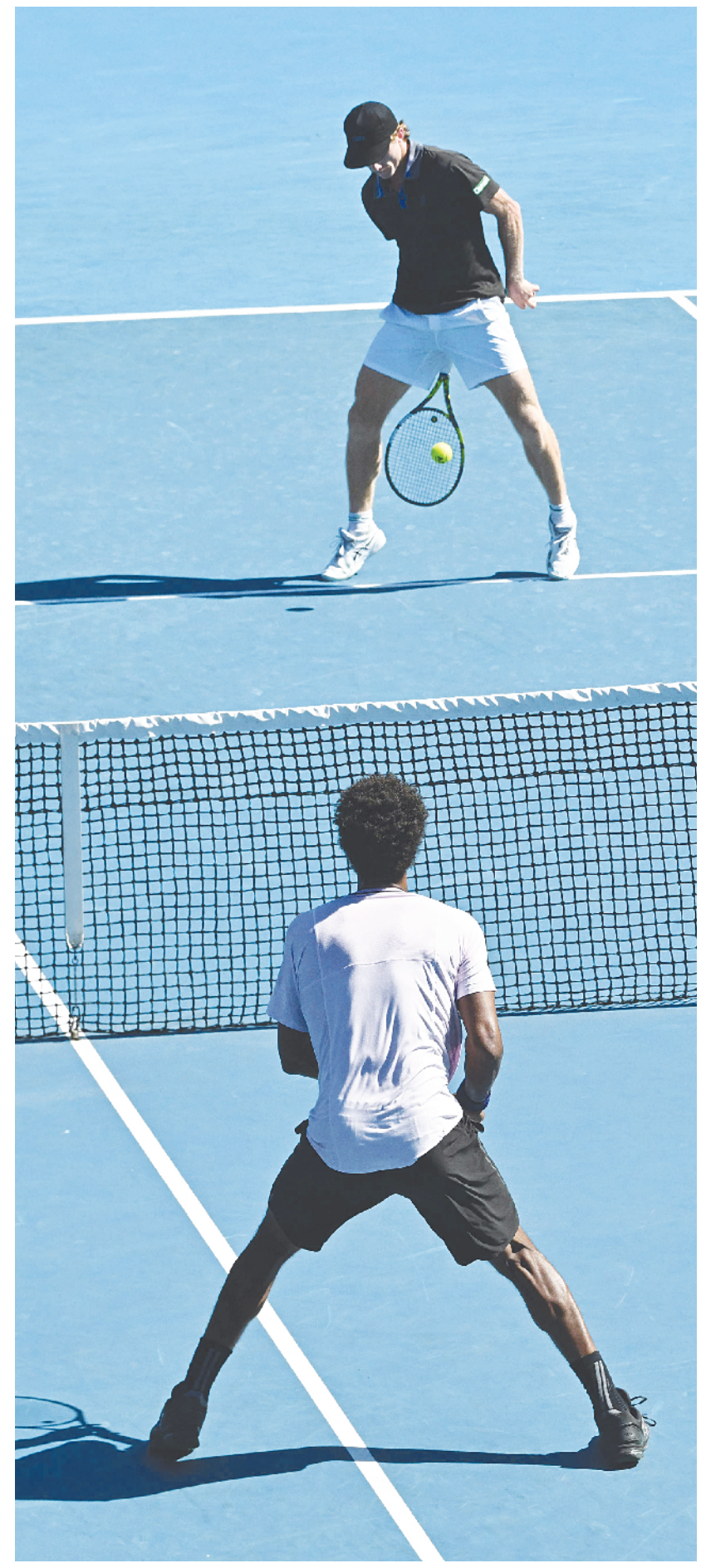
In the men's draw, 2023 finalist Stefanos Tsitsipas had to rally from a set down to beat Japan's Shintaro Mochizuki and avoid a first-round exit for the second year in a row.

Sinner's compatriot Lorenzo Musetti, the fifth seed, also advanced after his Belgian opponent Raphael Collignon retired in the fourth set.

Eighth seed Ben Shelton, who lost to Sinner in last year's semi-finals, beat Ugo Humbert in three tight sets while his fellow American Taylor Fritz, seeded one spot lower, needed four to get past French opposition in the shape of Valentin Royer.

But Brazilian 19-year-old Joao Fonseca, touted on the eve of the tournament by Roger Federer as a star of the future, was dumped out by Eliot Spizzirri at the first hurdle.

The American defied the crowd of chanting Brazilian fans to win 6-4, 2-6, 6-1, 6-2.—Agencies



AUSTRALIA'S Dane Sweeny hits a tweener against Gael Monfils of France during their Australian Open match at the Melbourne Park on Tuesday.—AFP

NONTHABURI (Thailand): Pakistan's Zaidullah Khan vies for the ball with Nepal's Subet Lama during their SAFF Futsal Championship match at the Nonthaburi Stadium on Tuesday. Pakistan came back from 4-1 down to secure a thrilling 4-4 draw thanks to goals by Nisar Hussain, Asif Ahmad Chaudhry and Muhammad Hassaan Zafar Khan. Jenish Prajapati had added to a first-half brace by Bikrant Narsingh Rana to put Nepal 3-0 up before Muhammad Ellham pulled one back for Pakistan, only for Suraj Gurung to make it 4-1. Pakistan's fightback, though, secured a point that took them to third place in the standings with seven points from four matches, trailing second-placed Bangladesh on goal difference. Maldives top the table with three wins from three, while Nepal sit fourth on five points from three matches.—Courtesy SAFF

Malik ends PSL playing days

LAHORE: Former Pakistan captain Shoaib Malik ended a decade-long association with the Pakistan Super League on Tuesday when he announced it was time to "call it a day".

The veteran all-rounder, who represented Karachi Kings, Multan Sultans, Peshawar Zalmi and Quetta Gladiators, had last year stepped down from his role as Domestic Cricket Mentor.

"I cherish every single moment and friendship I have made on and off the field throughout my 10 years of the Pakistan Super League as a player," the 43-year-old wrote on X. "It's time to call it a day. However, my passion and motivation to serve for the betterment of cricket will always stay. Thank you PSL."

Malik featured just twice for the Gladiators last season and leaves as the fourth-highest run-scorer in PSL history, scoring 2,350 runs in 92 matches at an average of 33.09.

He did not elaborate on his future plans although reports suggest he is likely to take a leadership role in the new Sialkot franchise.—Agencies

Australia down Japan in U-19 World Cup to make Super 6s

HARARE: Australia recorded a comfortable win against Japan in their second match of the U-19 World Cup to book a place in the Super 6s on Tuesday. Meanwhile, points were shared again in Bulawayo after the game between New Zealand and Bangladesh was abandoned due to rain.

Japan opted to bat first after winning the toss and despite losing Nikhil Pol early, were able to set a platform to post a competitive score on the board.

Nihar Parmar and Hugo Tani-Kelly built a solid 58-run partnership that was ended by a smart piece of Australian fielding as Parmar was run out on 33. But Tani-Kelly, the centurion in the last game, was in fine form and continued to aid the Japanese cause.

He was supported well by Charles Hinze after the departure of Parmar, adding 24 runs off 22 balls.

However, after his dismissal, Tani-Kelly kept running out of partners until Montgomery Hinze, whose 29 off 51 allowed Tani-Kelly to take Japan's score past the 200-run mark

Tani-Kelly was the pillar of the Japanese innings as he remained unbeaten on 79, setting the defending champions a target of 202.

Australia's opening pair sniffed out any chance of a threat in the second innings with a power-packed opening partnership.

Will Malajczuk and Nitesh Samuel posted a 135-run stand in just 15 overs to put Australia on course for the win.

Malajczuk scored a 51-ball hundred to record the fastest-ever century in U-19 World Cup history. His knock of 102 in 55 deliveries gave Australia enough momentum for them cruise to a win.

WINDHOEK: Australian opener Will Malajczuk plays a shot during the U-19 World Cup match against Japan at the High Performance Oval on Tuesday.—Courtesy ICC

Samuel remained unbeaten on 60 as Australia eased to an eight-wicket win to book their place in the Super 6s.

Australia next face Sri Lanka, who also have a perfect record in the tournament so far on Friday while Japan take on Ireland on Thursday.

New Zealand and Bangladesh had to settle for a share of the spoils after rain only allowed 10 overs of play on Tuesday.

Bangladesh had asked New Zealand to bat first after winning the toss and the Kiwis had got off to a good start thanks to Aryandeep Mann and captain Thomas Jones, who came in after the loss of Hugo Bogue's wicket.

However, the heavens opened at the end of the 10th over, allowing no further play as the game was called off.

This is New Zealand's second straight game that has been abandoned due to rain. They next face India on Saturday, while Bangladesh take on USA a day earlier.—Agencies

Cannot be pressurised to play in India, says Bangladesh sports adviser

DHAKA: Bangladesh government's sports adviser Asif Nazrul on Tuesday reiterated that under no condition would the national team travel to India for the T20 World Cup, despite an ultimatum from the International Cricket Council (ICC) to the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) on deciding its participation by January 21, the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency reported.

If BCB remains adamant on not travelling to India for the 20-team tournament, Scotland is likely to replace Bangladesh as per current rankings.

"I am not aware that Scotland will be included in our place," Asif told reporters. "If the ICC bows to pressure from the Indian cricket board and tries to impose pressure on us by setting unreasonable conditions, we will not accept those conditions.

"In the past, there are examples that Pakistan said that they will not travel to India and ICC changed the venue. We have asked to change the venue on logical ground and we cannot be pressurised to play in India by putting illogical pressure."

The standoff was triggered by the removal of Bangladesh pacer Mustafizur Rahman from Kolkata Knight Riders' roster for this year's Indian Premier League on Board of Control for Cricket in India's (BCCI) instructions for unspecified "developments all around".

Citing security concerns and national pride, the BCB responded by announcing its national team won't travel to India for its group stage games in Kolkata and Mumbai.

BCB wants to play each of its four group-stage matches in Sri Lanka, where the marquee India-Pakistan clash will also be held as per the mutually agreed arrangement for ICC events until 2027.

Bangladesh is currently placed in Group 'C' along with the West Indies, Italy, England and Nepal.

In its last meeting with ICC officials in Dhaka, the BCB had proposed swapping positions with Ireland in Group 'B', which features tournament co-hosts Sri Lanka, Australia, Oman and Zimbabwe.

Such a move would allow Bangladesh to remain in Sri Lanka for entirety of its group-stage engagements.

While the BCB considers it unsafe for its players to travel to India, the ICC's risk assessment report did not flag any specific or direct threat to the team's participation in the World Cup.

The bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh have deteriorated in recent months, exacerbated by the reported killings of Hindus in Bangladesh.

Former Bangladesh captain Tamim Iqbal and current Test skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto have cautioned against a very hard-line approach on the controversial subject, with the former saying that decisions taken today would have repercussions 10 years down the line.—Agencies

Suryakumar will not adapt to find form before T20 World Cup

NAGPUR: Indian skipper Suryakumar Yadav said on Tuesday he would not change his style of batting as he bids to stop an alarming slump in form heading into the ICC T20 World Cup.His team face New Zealand in the first game of a five-match T20 International series on Wednesday in Nagpur, ahead of the World Cup starting on Feb 7 in India and Sri Lanka.

Match starts at 6:30pm (PST)

But Suryakumar, formerly the ICC's top-ranked T20 International batsman, has scored just 244 runs across his last 22 innings in the format dating back to October 2024, without a single fifty.

"I have been batting really well [in the nets]," Suryakumar, who is set to play his 100th T20 International in the series opener, told reporters.

"And also talking about the runs, it will definitely come but at the same time I can't do things differently. I don't want to change my identity.

Suryakumar has flourished as a leader despite his personal struggles with the bat, leading India to six consecutive bi-lateral series wins and victory in last year's T20 Asia Cup.

"What has given me success in the past three, four years, I would like to bat the same way. And then if [the] performance comes I will take it, if it doesn't I will go back to the drawing board, practise again, work hard and come back stronger."

Suryakumar, 35, boasts a punishing T20 International strike-rate of 163.23, although that does drop slightly as skipper. He took over the T20 captaincy full-time when Rohit Sharma stepped down following India's World Cup triumph in 2024.

India are favourites to defend their World Cup title, sitting top of the ICC rankings and unbeaten in T20 series since a 3-2 loss to the West Indies in August 2023.

"If I have to take everyone's responsibility, then I will have to think well about the team," said Suryakumar.

"In that, I think there is no room for personal milestone. It's a team sport. Everyone has to step up; everyone has to do well."

Batter Tilak Varma and spinner Washington Sundar are both racing against time to be fit for the World Cup despite being named in the squad.

Ishan Kishan will return to the team against New Zealand for the first time since 2023 after being recalled to the squad, with Test and ODI captain Shubman Gill a surprise omission.

India were beaten at home in an ODI series by New Zealand for the first time ever earlier this month.

An under-strength Black Caps backed up their remarkable maiden Test series win in India, when they powered to a 3-0 clean sweep in 2024.

MILNE, BRACEWELL SUFFER INJURIES

New Zealand's preparations for the T20 World Cup suffered a setback with fast bowler Adam Milne and all-rounder Michael Bracewell sustaining injuries.

Milne injured his left hamstring while bowling for the Sunrisers Eastern Cape in the SA20 on Sunday and is currently being assessed, New Zealand Cricket (NZC) said in a statement on Tuesday.

Bracewell suffered a left calf strain while fielding in the third and final ODI against India in Indore on Sunday.

"Bracewell will be treated and monitored over the coming days before a decision on his further involvement in the tour is confirmed," the NZC said.

All-rounder Kristian Clarke has been added to the squad as cover for their first three T20 Internationals against India.

"We've got a fair bit of player movement at the moment with some guys returning from injury for this series, others joining us immediately from franchise cricket and the rest coming off the India ODI series," coach Rob Walter said.

"We want to ensure we've got enough pace-bowling options for the first three games of this series and it's a great opportunity for Kristian to stay on with the group a little longer on his first tour of India.

"He certainly showcased his talent in the ODI series, but what was particularly impressive was his calmness and ability to perform under pressure."New Zealand begin their World Cup campaign in Group 'D' against Afghanistan in Chennai on Feb 8.—Agencies